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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002263

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SUBJECT: TWO SISTANI STUDENTS COMMENT ON MARJAIYA VIEWS

REF: BAGHDAD 1843

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR MARGARET SCOBAY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a June 14 meeting, Sheikh Ahmed al-Dhahabi and Sheikh Ayad al-Ekabi, students of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, told PolOff the political and economic situation in Iraq is steadily improving but more needs to be done to rebuild the country. Al-Dhahabi relayed to PolOff the Marjaiya's view that while they expect the new government to last a full term, its composition does not fully reflect the wishes of the electorate. Al-Dhahabi said the Marjaiya blame poor economic conditions and reckless PSD and MNF-I actions for much of the friction between Coalition Forces (CF) and the Iraqi people. According to al-Dhahabi, the Marjaiya also disapprove of Arab League involvement in Iraqi affairs. End Summary.

Iraqi Governments Getting Better, But Not Perfect

¶2. (C) On June 14, Sheikh Ahmed al-Dhahabi and Sheikh Ayad al-Ekabi, students of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, told PolOff the political and economic situation in Iraq is improving, but much more time will be needed to rebuild the country. According to al-Dhahabi, the Najaf religious establishment believes Iraqi governments have gotten progressively better. The Marjaiya expect the current government to last a full term. Al-Dhahabi and al-Ekabi argued, however, that after four years, the current group of ministers should be replaced because the government did not completely reflect the democratic wishes of the Iraqi people. Al-Dhahabi added that "80% of the Marjaiya would prefer to vote for individual candidates, rather than electoral party lists, because they would like to vote out bad candidates from UIC 555."

Poor Economic Conditions

¶3. (C) According to al-Dhahabi, the Marjaiya think Iraq's problems can be attributed to popular discontent with poor economic conditions and basic services. He warned that public anger could soon reach such a level that the Marjaiya will not be able to control the Shia street. According to Al-Dhahabi, the Marjaiya feel the fight against the insurgency has distracted coalition countries from efforts to rebuild Iraq. PolOff noted the considerable assistance already provided for Iraqi reconstruction. Al-Dhahabi said that much more reconstruction needs to be done, and more Iraqis need jobs, if the public is to be placated.

PSDs and MNF-I Actions That Anger

¶4. (C) Al-Dhahabi and al-Ekabi told PolOff that PSDs are ruining relations between CF and average Iraqis. They alleged that PSD teams drive wildly, smash cars, and run over Iraqis, even in peaceful neighborhoods, causing Iraqis to become angry at CF. (Note: RSO reports that, in the past six months, no complaints have been received indicating that Chief of Mission PSDs have driven recklessly, caused traffic accidents, or injured Iraqis. End Note.) He added that MNF-I soldiers, while not as reckless as PSD teams, nevertheless sometimes detain Iraqis randomly and set up roadblocks, causing traffic jams. As a result, the good deeds performed by CF are often forgotten. PolOff countered that CF do not randomly detain Iraqis, but rather arrest those suspected of committing illegal acts. The roadblocks, while inconvenient, are necessary for security, he added.

Anger at Arab League

¶5. (C) Al-Dhahabi said the Marjaiya disapprove of Arab League involvement in Iraqi politics. According to al-Dhahabi, the Marjaiya think the Arab League has done nothing for Iraq, and the national reconciliation conference initiative has served only to give Iraq's enemies an avenue through which to meddle in Iraqi affairs. Al-Dhahabi said, "many enemies of Iraq are in the Arab League." (Note: Arab League Ambassador Lamani, who met with Sistani on May 31, reported that Sistani was supportive of the Arab League reconciliation conference. (reftel) End note.)

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Bionote

¶6. (C) Bionote: Sheikh Ahmed al-Dhahabi was born in Baghdad in 1972. He is married and has three sons. He holds a bachelor's degree in Islamic history from Baghdad University. He told Poloff that he will soon finish his studies to reach the rank of Ayatollah. Sheikh Ayad al-Ekabi was born in Baghdad in 1964. He leads Friday prayers at a mosque in the Al-Zafaraniya district of Baghdad. He currently serves on the Baghdad City Council and Karada District Advisory Council. He traveled to Japan in 2003, and to the United States on an international visitor program in 2004.
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